DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 292 107 CS 211 084

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TITLE Constraints in Recall: A Case from Balladry.
PUB DATE Aug 86
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (94th, Washington, DC, August 22-26, 1987).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Ballads; Comparative Analysis; Folk Culture; Oral Interpretation; *Recall (Psychology); Singing; Vocal Music
IDENTIFIERS *Constraints; Lyrics; North Carolina; Oral Tradition

ABSTRACT

A study examined changes in recall of a ballad that is part of an oral tradition in North Carolina, noting what changes occur, why those changes occur, and what lines are most susceptible to change. When a story is passed along orally, it sometimes changes so much that it may not be recognizable as the same when two versions are compared. Subjects included five traditional ballad singers, whose performances on different occasions were analyzed to determine changes in recall and changes among individual singers. Recall stability over a generation was examined by comparing the current versions with versions collected between 1912 and 1944. The recall of a naive group, 27 undergraduates who learned and recalled one version of the ballad, was also assessed. Results show that constraints present in this ballad limit the possible variations that can occur. Any variations must preserve at least the verse structure, the verse sequence, the line sequence within each verse, the rhyme scheme, and the metrical pattern. Verses that embellish the details of the story may be omitted. Constraints were preserved in versions of the ballad collected in the 70 years and to some degree by undergraduates hearing the ballad for the first time. (ARH)

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CONSTRAINTS IN RECALL: A CASE FROM BALLADRY

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CONSTRAINTS IN RECALL: A CASE FROM BALLADRY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines changes in recall of one song which is part of an oral tradition and attempts to understand not only what changes occur in recall but why those changes occur and what lines are most susceptible for change. The oral tradition being examined is the singing of ballads as currently practiced in North Carolina. Many of the currently sung ballads can be traced to England and Scotland over one hundred years ago.

From the work of Bartlett (1932) we know that when a story is passed from person to person orally, the story changes so much that it may not be recognizable as the same when two versions are compared. One would expect ballads to have the same properties since they are also passed orally from person to person. This is not the case. Five traditional ballad singers were asked to sing all the songs they knew which told a story about a train or ship wreck. Each singer performed the songs on two different occasions which were separated by a mean of 7 months. Using one ballad which every singer knew, the changes in recall between and within singers was examined.

Although all ballad singers were performing the same song, none of the songs were exactly identical. Even when the same singer performs the same song on two different occasions, both versions were not identical for any of the singers.

The changes both between and within singers maintain constraints present in this song and in all ballads. For example, rhymes always occur at the end of the second and fourth line of each verse. The rhyming word may change but the rhyming sound is maintained both between and within singers. Maintaining such constraints limits the possible word choices which can be substituted. Thus, by following the constraints present in ballads, singers stabilize the transmission of a song over generations. Furthermore, lines that do not follow these constraints or that follow them weakly are more likely to change. The constraints considered include the rhyming scheme, verse and line sequence, poetic ties between words, lines with high imagery value, and rhythmical structure.

Recall stability over a generation is examined by comparing the current versions with versions collected between 1912 and 1944 by Frank C. Brown (Belden & Hudson, 1952). The same ballad was collected from six other traditional singers in the same geographical location as the above five singers. These versions reveal that the variations in the song over the last sixty to forty years are the same as the variations currently seen between different singers. These variations maintain the same constraints present in the current versions.

Finally, in order to assess the effect of these constraints on a naive group, twenty-seven undergraduates learned and recalled one version of this ballad. Subjects listened to a tape of the ballad which consisted of ten repetitions of the song and lasted 13 minutes. A standard distractor task lasted for 10 minutes and was followed by recall. Undergraduates have better recall for lines that are high in imagery, contain fewer exceptions to the metrical pattern, and have greater causal connectedness.

WORD CHANGES BETWEEN FIRST AND SECOND PERFORMANCE FOR CURRENT SINGERS

Singer	Word Substitutions	Words Additions(+)/ Deletions(-)
1	straight - tall Border - Border's can't you - saying it's - on is - was the whistle - his whistle message - news said - read ye - you learn - on	said (+)
2	well it's - this is it's a line - lined great white mountain - white oak mountain	well (+) said (+) when his (-) was (-)
3	he was - they were	all (+) ADDED A VERSE IN SESSION 2
4	she - he the whistle - his whistle	then (+) and (+) yes (+)
5	Blowee - victory captain - buddy thirty - ninety says - saying he was - and we'll - we're going to	well they (+) he (+) down the grade making (+) OMMITED 2 VERSES ADDED 1 VERSE

CHANGES BETWEEN SINGERS

1.) The number of verses in each singer's version changes. Singers add verses that embellish the details of the story or give the setting.

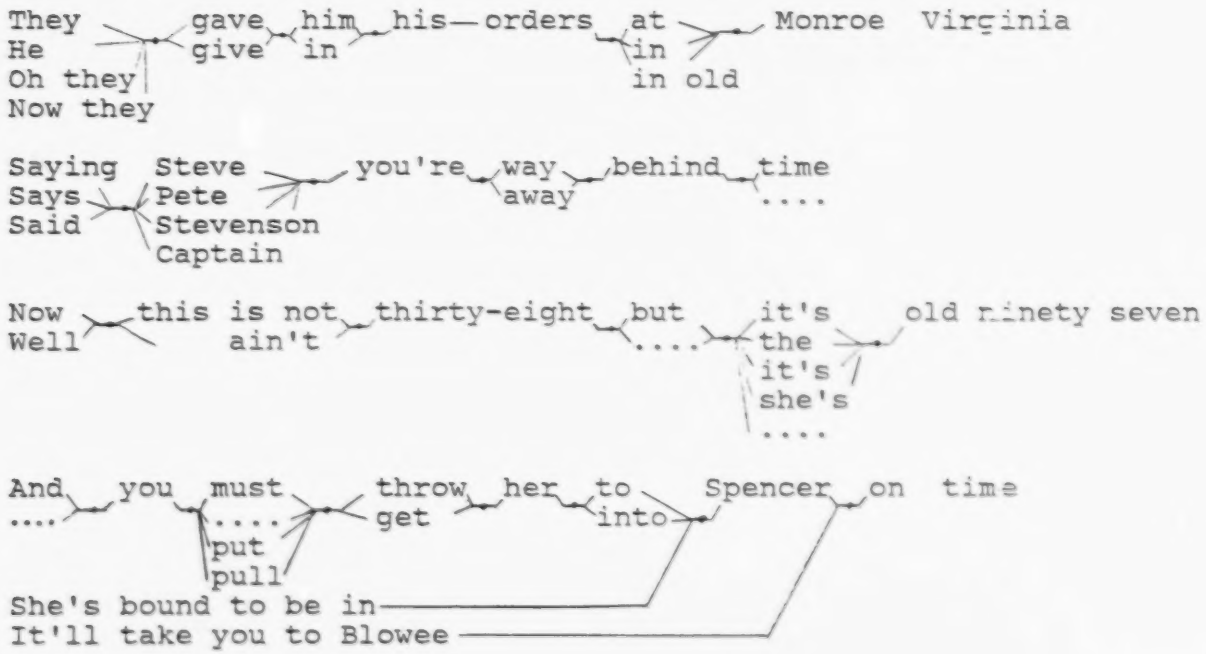
2.) The specific wording of a line may change while preserving the rhymes and poetic ties, the meaning, and the imagery.

3.) Occasionally, the first line of a verse will change while the last three lines remain constant.

4.) Occasionally, the first line is preserved while the last three lines are changed. In this case, a new rhyme scheme, in the same location, is incorporated.

5.) End assonance is occasionally substituted for the usual end rhyme.

EXAMPLE OF WORD CHANGES BETWEEN SINGERS



SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN 1912-1944 and 1982-1985 COLLECTIONS

1.) Most of the sixteen unique verses are found in both collections. Three verses occur in only one collection.

2.) Verses that were more frequently found in 1912-44 were more frequently found in 1982-85 (Correlation coefficient = .88).

CORRELATION BETWEEN NUMBER OF OCCURRENCES, IMAGERY RATING, MEANING RATING, AND % WORDS WITH POETIC TIES

		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
No. Occurrences (1912-44)	(1)				
No. Occurrences (1982-85)	(2)	.87*			
Imagery Rating	(3)	.33*	.18		
Meaning Rating	(4)	.19	.14	.26	
% Words with Poetic Ties	(5)	.44*	.43*	.12	.34*

* significant at $p < .05$
Ratings used a nine point scale in which "9" implied a high meaning or imagery content. Five judges completed each rating scale with a reliability of .82 for imagery and .86 for meaning.

SUMMARY

1.) Lines that occurred more often between 1912 and 1944 also occur more often between 1982 and 1985.

2.) Lines that occur more often in 1912-1944 have higher imagery ratings and more words with poetic constraints.

3.) Lines that occur more often in 1982-1985 have more words with poetic constraints.

EXPERIMENT

Stimulus.

Version A of "Wreck of the Old 97" from Belden and Hudson (1952) was recorded by a female singer.

Procedure.

Subjects listened to the stimulus tape ten times over a period of thirteen minutes. Subjects then solved math problem for ten minutes. Finally, subjects wrote the words to the ballad that they had heard.

Subjects.

Twenty-seven undergraduates participating in an introductory psychology class served as subjects.

Results.

Percent verbatim recall was significantly greater for lines with greater imagery, greater metrical agreement, and greater causal connectedness.

Metrical agreement was assessed by the number of syllables in the line that correctly fell on the rhythmical pattern as defined by the metrical feet and the musical score.

Causal connectedness was defined according to the definition of Trabasso and Sperry (1985). Lines were determined to be causally connected when judges indicated that line b could not have occurred if line a had not occurred. The number of such causal connections for each line was counted.

CORRELATION BETWEEN % RECALLED AND OTHER VARIABLES

		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Mean % Recalled	(1)					
Imagery Rating	(2)	.49*				
Meaning Rating	(3)	.06	.43*			
% Words with Poetic Ties	(4)	.15	.03	.28		
% Words with Metrical Agreement	(5)	.44*	.17	.40*	.43*	
No. of Causal Connections	(6)	.42*	.20	.17	.18	.37

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

1.) Versions of "Wreck of Old 97" have not changed in one generation.

2.) When a verse is recalled it occurs in the same sequence for all singers.

3.) When a verse is recalled, the same lines are recalled in the same order for all but 3 of the 70 verses examined.

4.) When a verse is recalled by more than one singer, the same rhyme scheme is used 94% of the time.

5.) The same rhythmical structure is used for all verses.

6.) Lines which have greater imagery and more words with poetic ties occur in more versions.

7.) Few lines are identical.

8.) When singers perform the same song on two different occasions, the versions are not identical.

9.) Undergraduates have better recall for lines with high imagery ratings, better metrical agreement, and greater causal connectedness to other lines.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

Constraints present in this ballad limit the possible variations that can occur. Any variations must preserve at least the verse structure, the verse sequence, the line sequence within each verse, the rhyme scheme, and the metrical pattern. Verses that embellish the details of the story may be omitted. These constraints are preserved in versions of this ballad collected in the 70 years and to some degree by undergraduates hearing the ballad or the first time.

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